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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the course-planning activities of faculty teaching introductory undergraduate courses, in order to assess influences on the process of curriculum revision. The findings of a survey of 2,311 faculty members in 97 institutions of higher education are previewed here, prior to publication. The study found that faculty from different disciplines discussing curriculum revision have various disciplinary influences that are associated with their beliefs about the purposes of education, about what describes a discipline, about what influences on course planning should be considered, and about how one should plan a course and arrange its content. It is felt that these differences create difficulties among members of curriculum revision committees in agreeing on the content of a curriculum. Thirteen additional readings are listed. (JDD)

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IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Why Does It Take "Forever" to Revise the Curriculum?

Faculty and administrators on many campuses in the country have recently, are currently, or soon will be engaged in curriculum revision. This action is sometimes self-motivated, but more often it occurs in response to national reports, accountability demands from legislatures and accrediting agencies, or general concern about the preparation of college graduates. Revising the curriculum takes an average of five years to complete, with participants attempting to reach consensus. Collegial, democratic processes are often believed to contribute to the length of the debate. Disciplinary differences among faculty, however, may be the cause of the seemingly interminable process.

Often debates that delay curriculum decisions and subsequent implementation occur as faculty argue that courses from their discipline be included in the general education curriculum. This action is often interpreted as being politically motivated, as an effort to protect turf, or as a way to increase the number of students being taught. But faculty are not, in fact, always motivated by such self-serving concerns—they may simply be arguing for including the principles on which their disciplines are based.

Disciplinary Differences

Because faculty have been so strongly socialized during their graduate training, they feel strongly about the purposes of education, about what constitutes a discipline, about how one should plan courses within a discipline, and about what the content of a course should be. Recent research at NCRIPTAL by Professors Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther has shown that disciplinary differences among faculty are much stronger than all other influences on how faculty plan the courses they design for presentation to students.

During the fall and winter of 1986-87, Professors Stark and Lowther began a study of the course-planning activities of faculty teaching introductory undergraduate courses. As part of the study's pilot project, Professors Stark and Lowther interviewed eighty-nine faculty from eight different disciplines at eight different types of institutions. The results of these interviews guided a national survey. This survey was completed by 2,311 faculty members in ninety-seven institutions during the winter of 1988. Although the full results of this survey will not be available until spring, 1989, the early

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results indicate that the findings of the national survey will reinforce the findings of the pilot study. Here is a preview of those findings.

The purpose of education. When asked to rank a number of possible purposes of education, more than half of the faculty members indicated that developing effective thinking is the most important purpose of education. They did not agree as a group, however, on the second most important purpose of education, although they did respond quite consistently within their disciplines. For example, literature and nursing faculty believe that clarification of values is an important purpose of education while mathematics faculty are not likely to share this belief.

Characterization of one's academic discipline. Faculty, when asked to characterize their discipline, gave disparate responses, although, once again, there were strong similarities within each specific discipline. Whereas many faculty in biology, business, nursing, and mathematics characterize their field as an organized body of knowledge, faculty in composition and literature rarely share this view of their field.

Influences on course planning. Faculty from different disciplines also responded to different influences when planning their courses. As with faculty responses on most issues in the research study, what influences faculty differs only modestly by type of institution, but it is consistent within disciplines. Faculty in history believe they are heavily influenced by the discipline while faculty in composition believe they are more heavily influenced by their own background and student characteristics. As part of a professional program, nursing faculty are very concerned about standards set by groups outside their program while many disciplines plan programs with little consideration of such influences.

Course content arrangement. The ways in which faculty arrange the content of their courses also varies greatly by discipline. Regardless of the type of institution, faculty from each discipline tend to arrange the presentation of content in much the same manner: History professors structure their courses according to chronological sequence; mathematics and biology faculty arrange them according to specific organizing concepts; faculty in literature and composition arrange content according to how they perceive the needs of learners in their courses.

None of these results is surprising. Because the socialization processes in the academic disciplines are such compelling forces, you would expect that faculty who are trained in the same discipline often teach in the same manner. What is surprising is that the imprinting of the disciplines on faculty is so strong that even the type of institution at which they teach appears to have little influence on how they present content in their courses.

Accordingly, faculty discussing curriculum revision have various disciplinary influences that are associated with different beliefs about the purposes of education, about what describes a discipline, about what influences should be considered, and about how one should plan a course and arrange its content. No wonder curriculum revision committees find it difficult to agree on the content of a curriculum that needs to encompass so many divergent ideas.

Reaching Consensus

Because these differences are sometimes barriers to effective communication, it may be important to air them before any discussions about the content of a curriculum begin. By discussing various views on educational purposes, disciplinary influences, and course content arrangements, faculty can enter subsequent discussions with an understanding of the reasons behind differences of opinion. It might also be advantageous to agree in advance how differing viewpoints might be incorporated into curricular design and thus ease the way to quicker consensus on curricular change.

— Michele Genthon

Further Readings on This Topic

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